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CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN THOUGHT

XIV.

How is Jesus the Spiritual Leader of Mankind?

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"Then the end, when he shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be abolished is death. . . . But when he saith, All things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, who did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all."—1 Cor. xv. 24–29.

The last clause of this passage teaches more plainly, perhaps, than any other in the New Testament the error of the Church in making Jesus equal with the Father. It teaches us that in his very highest elevation, when all evil is to be put under his feet, it is God who puts all things under him. And it adds, in language too plain to be misunderstood, that, when Jesus has reached his highest place and dignity in the universe, then he, *the Son*, himself "shall be subject to him who did put all things under him, that God may be all in all." He who is *subject* to another cannot be the Supreme Being. He who gives up the kingdom to God the Father cannot have a share in the divine supremacy, therefore cannot be God. This text alone shows that the apostle Paul did not believe Jesus to be God.

The passage we have read makes two important statements. The first is that Christ is to be the spiritual leader of mankind till he has overcome all his enemies; that is, Christianity is to be the leading religion of the world till its principles become supreme and are universally accepted.

Then Christianity is to cease to exist as a separate religion, and is to be merged and fulfilled in one more universal, that of the Father. This is what is here spoken of as *the end*,—"Then the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father"!

That Jesus is in some sense the spiritual leader of the race, few will deny. That his teaching concerning God, duty, and immortality is in advance of all other teaching is cordially granted by men of every school of thought even by those who deny his supernatural character. That his life and character make him the highest type of humanity is the testimony not of his professed followers only, but of such men as John Stuart Mill, Rousseau, Goethe, and others who are by no means professed believers in Christianity.

Jesus is the acknowledged leader of mankind in religion and morals. But it is interesting to ask how he has become so. How was it that Greek culture and Roman civilization accepted as their guide in the highest realm of thought a Syrian peasant, a crucified Jew? How is it that he continues to be the leader, after countless revolutions, barbarian conquests, changes of language, customs, and manners, the discovery of new worlds, the immense advance of knowledge, the conquests of science, social changes, political reforms? Almost everything else has changed, but the four Gospels remain the sacred books of the most advanced races. The artless sketch which they contain of Jesus, as biography most imperfect, the merest outline of his teaching and actions, is still accepted as the portrait of the most exalted type of human nature, the object of reverence and love to the highest intelligence and the noblest aspiration.

I think we may say that doctrinal definitions and dogmatic beliefs have contributed very little to this result. Jesus has not obtained this power by being called in the

creeds "God the Son," or being represented as a supernatural being, essentially different from his race. It is because he is our brother that he has become our master. It is because he does not wish to be called "Lord! Lord!" but to have men do the will of his Father in heaven, that we reverence him the more. He is a revelation of God; God manifest in the flesh; the brightness of God's glory; not seeking his own glory, but effacing himself in the brightness of the Father's infinite love. Paul states the secret of Jesus when he says that, though he was the very image of God, he did not show pride in holding this great position, but humbled himself, and took on him the form of a servant and submitted to the death of the cross,—"*Wherefore God hath highly exalted him*, and given him a name above every name, that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father.*" He thus illustrated his own saying, "He that exalteth himself shall be abased, but he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." He sought not his own glory, but that of the Father. His joy was to bring men to God, not to bring them to himself. He called himself "the door" through which they passed to the Father; the shepherd who took care of the sheep, but not their owner; the way, the truth, the life; the road by which they went; the truth to which he bore witness, the life he manifested. He thus made himself the leader of the race, walking before men to show them the way. They have gladly followed him to his Father and their Father, to his God and their God, not because of any supernatural claims, but because he is their brother and friend, in whom their troubled hearts find rest and peace. His atonement is no mystical transaction or legal satisfaction of the divine attributes; but it is reconciling man

to his Maker, making the child at one with his Father, making God's kingdom come to us here to-day, making this life and the next one, duty and love one, bringing harmony in the place of discord. "As thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that these disciples may be one in us." So the gulf between time and eternity, between human infirmity and the kingdom of heaven, is bridged over by the great faith of Jesus. The leadership of Jesus is this,—that he leads men to God, to heaven, to peace, to immortal hope. So long as he does this, men will follow him.

But there is another sphere in which he is also a leader. He not only shows the solitary soul the way to God, but he unites man with man, removes war, conflict, jealousy, rivalry. These, also, are enemies who are to be put under his feet. He is not only to make atonement between man and God, but also between man and man. This is the second part of his great work, and as yet seems hardly begun. He is to put down rule, authority, and power, and substitute conviction, truth, love, in their place. The reign of force and fraud is not to last forever.

The nations which call themselves Christians, and are the most advanced in civilization, have as yet little faith in the power of truth and love. Europe to-day, with its immense military preparations, its enormous armies and navies arrayed against each other, seems more like the kingdom of hell than the kingdom of heaven. The conquests of science and the triumphs of invention are used to destroy life, not to save it. Bismarck is the embodied representative, on the Continent, of faith in physical force. England moves in the same direction, though swayed by opposite impulses,—first toward conquest, then toward conciliation. I was lately reading Froude's "Oceana," in which he describes the course of England in South Africa. With the pen of an honest historian he shows

how the English government has blindly interfered with the rights, first of the Dutch settlers, then of the native tribes, violating its own treaties, breaking its own promises; and all from a persuasion that it must uphold its prestige by assuming rule and authority where it has not the least claim to exercise them. So it sent Gordon to the Soudan with no clear idea of what it wanted, and then left him to be a victim of its own ignorance. So it has sacrificed its armies in Afghanistan from dread of what Russia might possibly be wishing to do. England claims the right to take possession of any part of the world she desires to have, but stands amazed if Russia or Germany, France or Italy, manifest any similar purpose.

When we say that Christianity is to become the religion of mankind, we do not, therefore, mean a system of doctrines or any particular outward church; but we mean the essential ideas, the leading principles, the vital spirit of Christ's teaching. And these, I think, may be contained in two statements,—the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man. In these lie the very essence and originality of the mind of Christ. Confucius taught, before Christ, something like the Golden Rule. Brahmanism taught, before him, that God is spirit; Moses and Buddha commanded to love one's neighbor as one's self; Zoroaster, that we are sent into the world to bear witness to the truth. The best things which we see separated in other religions we find united in the fulness of Christ's teaching. But he added something peculiarly his own. He taught the Fatherhood of God in a wholly new sense, so that he could truly says, "No man cometh to the Father but by me." He taught that every child of God, wise or weak, good or evil, is dear to him; that his sun shines on the evil and the good; that we must love those who hate us, as God loves those who hate him; that there is joy in his presence over

one sinner that repents, more than over ninety and nine that need no repentance. He taught this infinite, unalterable love of the Divine Soul to every human child. The benevolence of God to the race had been taught before. His universal goodness, as shown in nature and providence, had been revealed in other religions. But the personal relation of God as a Father to every child was a new contribution of Jesus to the life of the race. It vitalized the world with a strange influence. It created a new faith and hope. It made life worth living. It filled an age, empty of God, with a sense of the Divine Presence. It gave a new impulse to human progress. It was a new creation, the beginning of a new order, an original movement. It was not a doctrine merely, but a spiritual impulse. It reconciled an estranged world to God. Those who were afar off were made nigh. The sense of sin was appeased into holy repentance and ardent love by the sight of the divine forgiveness. The Supreme Being was not far away, as an unknown order of the universe, an unknown power supporting the laws of nature; but he became the friend of the poor, the consoler of the forlorn, the daily companion and comforter of the desolate, nearer than any other to the longing heart of man. The human race came to the Father by Christ, in whom his fulness dwelt. Of that fulness all received, and grace on grace.

This is the great experience which has constituted the working power of Christian faith in all time. This faith is to overcome the evils of the world. It is by no means universally received either outside of the Church or within the Church. Outside the circle of professed Christians many see in God only the great order of Nature, the nexus of law, or what Matthew Arnold calls "a power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness." And, within the Church, how little is this great principle realized! What

is the meaning of this whole controversy about a future probation for the heathen, which is rending in twain the Congregational body, but this, that God is supposed to have erected an insurmountable barrier against his own mercy by making the human body subject to death? Jesus says that to those who have his faith death is nothing, but the Church has made it everything. It is stronger than the love of God. It prevents all possibility of the sinner's repentance. This merely physical change alters the whole destiny of man, and takes away the sovereignty of God over his creatures. The infinite power of God is now unable to save the soul; the infinite wisdom of God can find no way to reach the heart of his child; the infinite love stands helpless because the muscular movements which propel the blood have ceased to act. Before death God will leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go to save the one lost sheep: after death God's interest in him is wholly gone. And all this is a mere assumption, for there is not a passage in the New Testament which says that the probation or education of the soul ceases with death. The Church is, therefore, still a long way from believing in the Fatherhood of God, regarding him as Father while we are on earth, but not as the Father of the countless multitudes who have passed from earth without having heard of the name of Jesus. This great truth of the Fatherhood of God has, therefore, a work to do before it has put all that opposes it under its feet.

And the other great truth which is peculiar to the teaching of Jesus is the brotherhood of man. Jesus says, "A *new* commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another." To be philanthropic and humane was no new commandment; to do good to one's neighbor was no new commandment; sympathy with human suffering was not first taught by Jesus. Pity and compassion beat in the

hearts of those who have never heard of Jesus. But to see in every man, even the lowest, a brother; to find in him an immortal soul, capable of endless development; to know that he is the child of God, infinitely dear to the Father, and, therefore, our brother; to be made able to look through the poor surface and reach the living centre in his soul, and thus to recognize an infinite worth and dignity in man,—this is the new commandment of Jesus, a truth developed out of the depths of his own soul. This made him the friend of publicans and sinners: this caused him to draw all men unto him, made him the brother of the Roman soldier and the Samaritan woman, and is the basis of a really universal religion. Before Christ came, the religions of the world were of races and nations; but Christianity at once overflowed those barriers, knowing neither Jew nor Gentile, pagan or heathen, but making all one in Christ Jesus.

This principle of human brotherhood ought at last to destroy war, and teach us to overcome evil with good. It must supplement force with kindness, must bring about the reform of criminals, and not merely their punishment. It must find a way to lift the burdens which still weigh down the human race, to pour light into the dark places of the earth, to give to every child an opportunity of growth into what God has made him to be.

We become followers of Jesus by entering into these convictions, and not by saying, "Lord! Lord!" If we would follow him, we also must have faith in God, not merely as power and law, but as father and friend. We must trust in him as an infinite, forgiving love. We must learn to lean on his present guidance and inspiration. We must be sure that neither death nor life can separate us from his love. So we become sons of God as Jesus was Son of God, not by any outward privilege, but by an inward attitude and living experience in the soul.

And so we are followers of Jesus, when we recognize the sacredness and worth of every human soul; when we believe that the evils of the world can be overcome by good, that love is stronger than force, truth more mighty than contrivance, and that man is made to be helped by being trusted. We follow Christ when we have this confidence in the supreme power of truth and love, this firm faith in the immortality of goodness, and are sure that all the outward forces of the universe are weak compared with the power of Christian faith, hope, and love, which will at last bring that

> "One far-off divine event
> To which the whole creation moves."